

Public Health Standards: Essential Programs for Improving Health

You not only need to know where you want to go. You must also know how far you have to go to get there.

This proposition underlies the work of the PHIP Standards Committee. Finalized and published in June 2001, *Standards for Public Health in Washington State* provide a framework to measure the performance of the state's public health agencies and programs. The standards state clearly what every citizen has a right to expect of the government public health system, in terms of:

- Understanding key health issues,
- Protecting people from disease,
- Assuring a safe and healthy environment,
- Promoting healthy living, and
- Helping people get the services they need.

The standards recognize that both the State Department of Health and every local health department are part of the larger public health system. State and local agencies are interdependent. They each have different roles to play, but when it comes to protecting public health, every agency in the system is a critical player in keeping residents healthy.

The performance standards work began with a field test that the Public Health Improvement Partnership conducted during 2000. Next, copies of the standards were distributed, along with communication materials interpreting them, to public health agencies and the Washington Legislature. To help public health workers understand and use the standards, the PHIP contracted for training up to 200 people in eight settings across the state. Managers and staff learned how to use the standards to integrate quality improvement efforts into public health practice. This training is an important component of the PHIP workforce development strategies described on page 31. *Standards for*

Public Health in Washington State were the basis for defining competencies needed by public health workers.

The training also prepared public health officials for a "baseline assessment" of the standards. Establishing a baseline was necessary to describe Washington's public health system as it is currently performing. The standards actually reach beyond what the public health system is capable of with current resources. Measuring performance by these standards over time will demonstrate both the achievements and the pressing needs of public health agencies and programs.



"Performance measurement is key to accountability for Washington's public health system."

*—Standards Committee Co-chair
Torney Smith (Deputy Director,
Spokane Regional Health District)
and colleagues*

The baseline assessment, conducted in 72 local and state programs and sites during 2002, revealed what the system is performing well, identified what the system does not perform well, and provided an opportunity to learn from the system's high performers. The charts on page 21 show overall results. These are aggregate findings that summarize many specific measures for the State Department of Health and every local health jurisdiction.

At each site visit during the baseline assessment, consultants evaluated the ability of the agency to demonstrate performance, based on measures associated with each standard. Consultants also collected examples of excellent work—hundreds of real-life “exemplary practices” that will be shared electronically in the form of a web-based toolkit, available to everyone.

In general, the baseline assessment showed that Washington's public health system performs strongest in the topic areas of assessment, managing communicable disease and other risks, and in prevention and community health promotion. Weaker performance areas include protecting environmental health and assuring access to critical health services. The assessment also found a connection between the size of local jurisdictions, their budgets, and their number of employees with performance on the standards. In general, larger departments were better able to meet the standards, but this was not always true. Some small and rural local public health jurisdictions performed better on some standards than their urban counterparts. So, the baseline made clear that, in addition to having sufficient staff and financial resources, strong leadership, agency focus, and goal-setting are important elements of performance.

Individual agencies and the Department of Health will review the assessment findings in site-specific reports, which will help them set priorities and target resources to improve performance. The findings will also reveal opportunities for pooling resources to bring about system-wide improvements.

In addition to the five topics addressed by the standards, the committee recognizes that basic administrative capacity must be in place for a health

jurisdiction to carry out its responsibilities. The committee has begun to define administrative expectations, addressing such areas as accounting systems, facilities management, and personnel policies. This work will be refined and field-tested in the coming months (see Appendix 4).

The PHIP Standards Committee is now working on ways to secure the capacity and resources needed to continue system improvement efforts. They believe that “what gets measured, gets done.” A sustained effort to measure system-wide quality improvement achieved through the standards process is critical to improving public health and establishing accountability within the system. Washington's public health leadership must now mobilize the information gained from the baseline by linking it to the priorities they set for their agencies, both state and local.

For more information about Public Health Standards:

Standards for Public Health in Washington State

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/Standards>

PHIP Public Health Standards Committee Page

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/phip/Standards.htm>

Standards for Public Health in Washington State: Baseline Evaluation Report

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/phip/documents/BaselineReport11-12.pdf>

Turning Point Project—Performance Management Collaborative

<http://www.turningpointprogram.org/Pages/perfmgt.html>

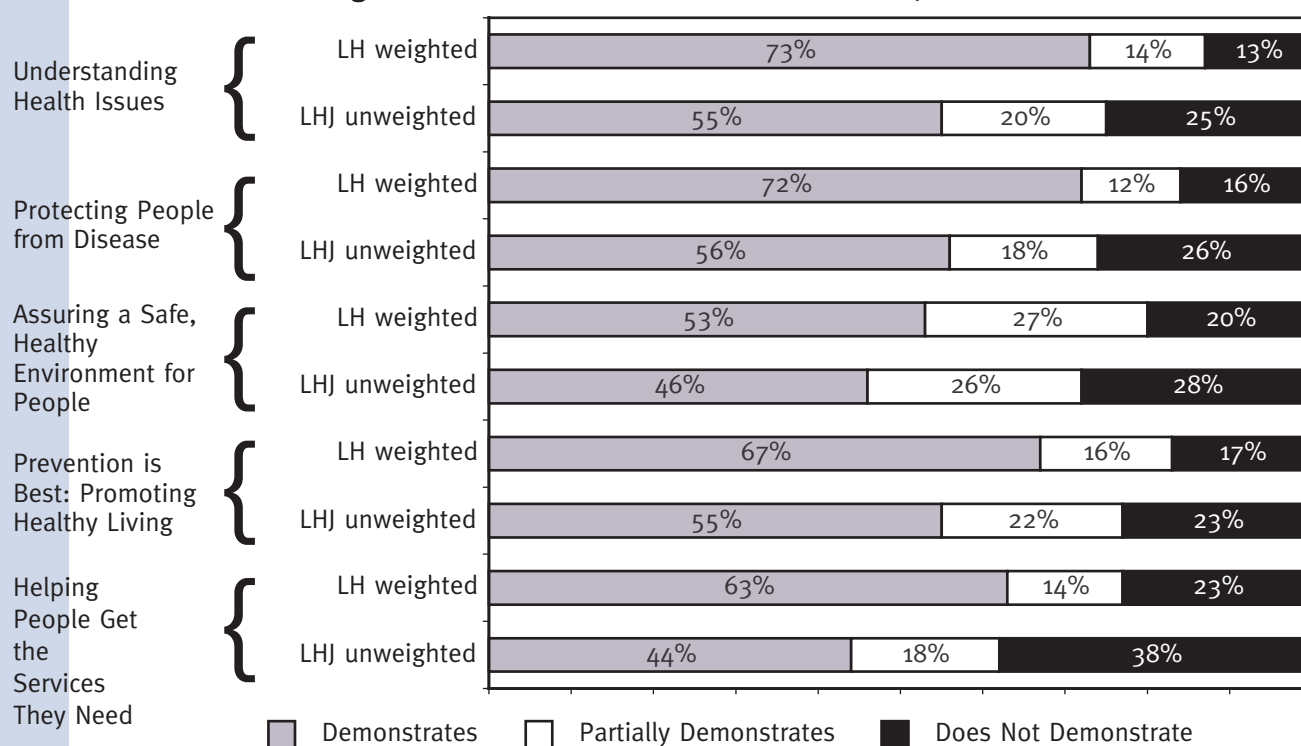
National Public Health Performance Standards Program

<http://www.phppo.cdc.gov/nphpsp/>

Standards for Public Health in Washington State—Exemplary Practices

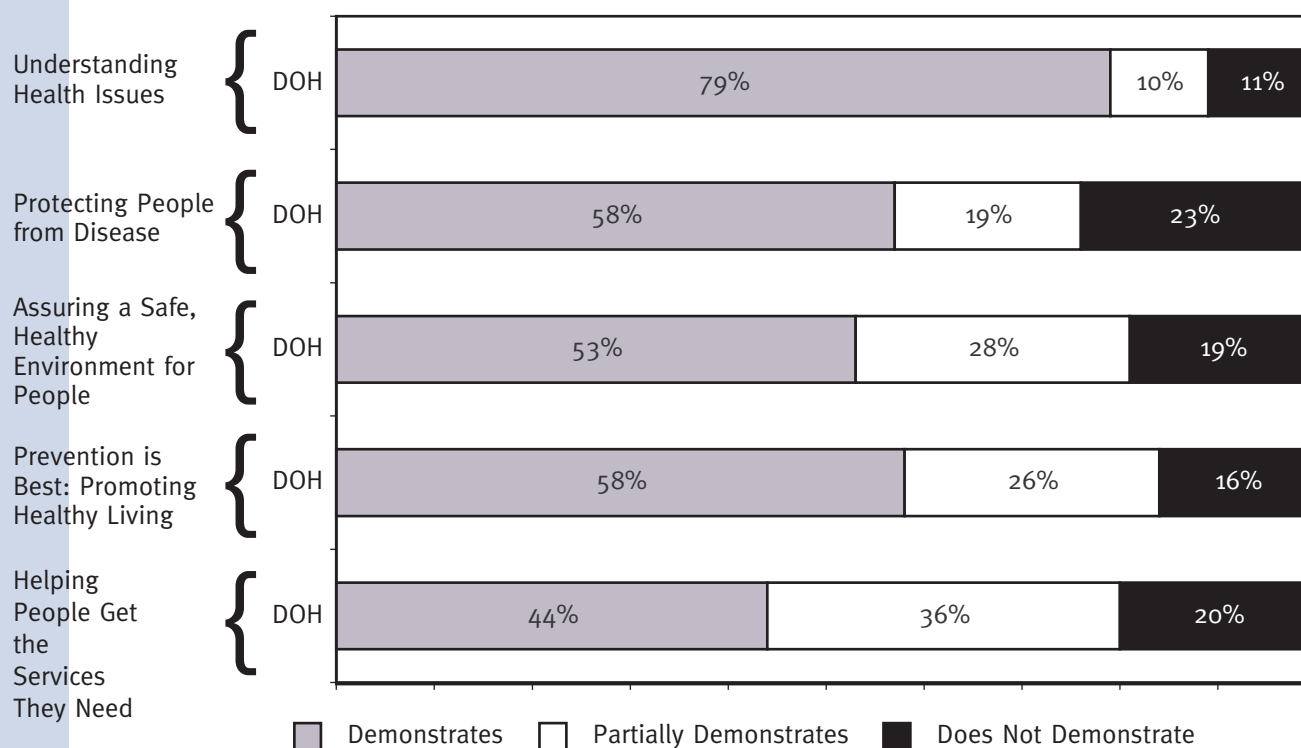
<http://www.doh.wa.gov/phip/StandardsExemplaryPractices.htm>

Where We Are in 2002: Demonstrating Where We Can Meet Washington's Standards for Local Public Health Jurisdictions



Weighted scores indicate the percent of the population affected by the demonstration level. Unweighted scores indicate the percent of jurisdictions affected by the demonstration level.

Where We Are in 2002: Demonstrating Where We Can Meet Washington's Standards for Department of Health Programs



Recommendations for 2003-2005

1. Analyze baseline data, including exemplary practices, to determine priorities for system-wide improvements.

The greatest opportunity to strengthen the public health system will come from joining efforts across local jurisdictions, working in concert with the state Department of Health. Data from the baseline study will help public health leaders select and focus on the most important opportunities for improvement.

2. Adopt a schedule and process to support regular use of *Standards for Public Health in Washington State* to evaluate and describe the status of Washington's public health system.

The baseline data will help us take action to improve the system now, but real progress will depend on consistent follow-up, over time. The Standards Committee recommends measurement by independent consultants at intervals of about three years, with self-assessment during intervening years.

3. Continue to develop the description of needed administrative capability, and field test and revise it for use in future system-wide evaluation processes.

Administrative standards address the infrastructure needed for public health agencies to carry out their mission. A set of standards has been developed that address basic requirements such as accounting, technology support, and personnel policies. Once tested, these can be included in future assessments of the public health system.

4. Link the work of the PHIP Standards Committee with that of the Finance Committee, Key Health Indicators Committee, and other committees to assure that actions guiding public health system improvement will yield maximum efficiency in performance and effectiveness.

The PHIP committee chairs meet regularly to exchange information, coordinate work plans, and set complementary goals. This important process has become one way we shape Washington's public health system and should continue.